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Early Childhood Education in Conflict Zones

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Abstract:

Early childhood education (ECE) conflict zones face profound challenges that undermine children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. Armed conflicts disrupt access to education through displacement, infrastructure destruction, and insecurity, leaving millions of children without safe learning environments (UNICEF, 2023). This report focuses on Syria, where years of war have deprived over two million children of education (UNESCO, 2018). These children face severe psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression, impairing their ability to learn and develop (Save the Children, 2020).

This report emphasizes the dual importance of immediate and sustainable solutions to address these challenges. Immediate measures include providing psychological support, temporary learning spaces, and access to basic educational resources, while sustainable approaches, such as the "Hope Initiative," focus on creating resilient educational systems capable of withstanding future crises. This initiative, inspired by global best practices, proposes an integrated framework of proactive strategies, including teacher training, resource mobilization, and technology-driven learning solutions (Moving Minds Alliance, 2023).

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study incorporates interviews with affected families, surveys with victims and their families, and case studies, such as that of Ahmed, a young Syrian child navigating educational challenges amid conflict. Findings reveal that displacement, resource shortages, and psychological stress significantly hinder educational progress, while community-driven initiatives provide hope and resilience. The report underscores the urgent

need for regional collaboration and innovative policies to ensure that education remains a priority, even in the most challenging environments (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019).

This research reaffirms the transformative power of education as a tool for resilience, community empowerment, and long-term peacebuilding. By addressing the unique needs of children in conflict zones, we can pave the way for a future where every child, regardless of circumstance, has the opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute to a more peaceful world.

Introduction:

Following the Arab Summit held in Bahrain in 2024, five unique and significant initiatives were launched under the patronage of His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. Among these key initiatives that captured our attention as educators and teachers is the commitment to ensure that every Arab child has access to appropriate and free education. During his speech at the summit, the Bahraini foreign minister highlighted a staggering statistic that calls for immediate intervention through innovative and practical initiatives. He cited a UNESCO report from 2018 indicating that over 10 million Arab children aged between 5 and 15 are out of school, deprived of their fundamental right to education (UNESCO, 2018).

This alarming situation necessitates that we provide a glimmer of hope for these children. This report aims to address this urgent need. So both of us, Mr. Jaber Mustafa and Mr. Younis Bukhari, both affiliated with the Ministry of Education, have worked diligently to propose remedial solutions for those affected under the initiative titled "Hope." Additionally, we aim to develop preventive measures to establish a robust Arab educational framework capable of

combating any challenges and conflicts in the region, thereby protecting innocent children who bear no responsibility for their circumstances.

In light of the ongoing conflicts and instability in various Arab regions, it is imperative that we focus on creating resilient educational systems that can adapt to these challenges. Research indicates that education in conflict zones not only fosters resilience among children but also contributes to long-term peace-building efforts (Save the Children, 2020). Therefore, our report will explore both immediate interventions and sustainable strategies to ensure that education remains a priority, even in the most challenging environments. In this report we took the Syrian conflict zone as an example, because it is one of the longest ones, and it is still affecting Syrian children to this day. As a community we can learn a lot from these unfortunate scenes to avoid this happening again to other children in the region, specifically Gazan children, so we tried our best to come up with something that can give these children hope.

The significance of the study:

Significance of the Study

      1.   Inclusivity and Community Integration

•   Ensure all children, regardless of circumstances, feel part of their community and develop a sense of belonging.

•   Prepare children for life as contributing members of their community both during childhood and adulthood.

      2.   Restoration of Hope

• Provide children with the hope and opportunity to pursue their dreams despite the adversity caused by conflict.

3. Mental Health Impact of Armed Conflict

• Recognize the profound psychological effects of armed conflict on children, including a heightened risk of developing mental health issues such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems.

• Highlight the alarming statistics, such as 60.5% of children affected by the Syrian Civil War meeting criteria for at least one psychological disorder, and the prevalence of depression (12.5%), PTSD (11.5%), and anxiety (9.2%) among Syrian refugee children in Turkey.

4. Building Resilience through Support Systems

• Emphasize the critical role of family and caregiver support in fostering resilience in children.

• Advocate for tailored interventions that address individual experiences rather than relying on generalized approaches.

5. Educational and Psychosocial Challenges

• Acknowledge how trauma-specific and post-trauma factors contribute to learning difficulties, behavioural issues, and social integration problems in educational settings for refugee children.

• Highlight findings, such as Khamis' (2021) study, which shows that pre-trauma, trauma-specific, and post-trauma variables significantly impact psychosocial adjustment.

6. Long-Term National Recovery

• Address the importance of education in preparing children for the future rebuilding of Syria.

• Equip Syrian children with the knowledge and skills necessary for contributing to the nation's recovery, ensuring they are ready to take on rebuilding efforts when the conflict subsides.

7. Focus on Proactive Education

• Stress the necessity of providing education during conflicts to prevent long-term developmental and societal setbacks.

• Highlight education as a vital tool for empowering children and enabling faster recovery and stability in post-conflict environments.

Literature Review:

Early childhood education (ECE) is a critical foundation for lifelong learning, socio-emotional development, and well-being. However, conflict zones significantly hinder access to quality ECE, exacerbating inequalities and threatening long-term developmental outcomes. This review synthesizes findings from academic and organizational reports to explore these impacts.

Access to Education in Conflict Zones

Conflict zones disrupt access to ECE through displacement, insecurity, and infrastructure destruction.

- **Displacement and Migration**: Armed conflicts force families to flee their homes, leading to overcrowded refugee camps where ECE services are limited. For instance, in South Sudan and Chad, children face significant barriers to accessing structured early learning programs (UNICEF, 2023; Moving Minds Alliance, 2023).

- **School Destruction**: Attacks on schools are common in conflict zones. In Syria, nearly one-third of schools have been damaged or destroyed, leaving children without safe learning spaces (Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack, 2019).

- **Inequitable Access**: Marginalized groups, including girls and children with disabilities, face disproportionate barriers to accessing education, as families in conflict zones often deprioritize early learning in favor of survival (Right to Education Initiative, 2018).
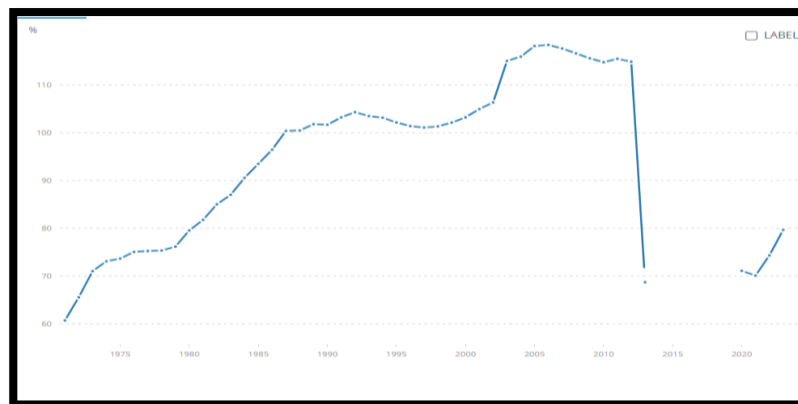
Enrollment includes Individuals officially registered in a given educational program, or stage or module thereof, regardless of age. Data on education are collected by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics from official responses to its annual education survey. All the data are mapped to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) to ensure the comparability of education programs at the international level. The current version was formally adopted by UNESCO Member States in 2011. The reference years reflect the school year for which the data

are presented. In some countries the school year spans two calendar years (for example, from September 2010 to June 2011); in these cases the reference year refers to the year in which the school year ended (2011 in the example).

This bar show how Syrian children stopped getting education after the unfortunate circumstances of the war the drop rate of the students in schools dropped massively which made them lose their right of teaching.

According to UNICEF estimates for 2021, more than two million children in Syria are still deprived of education due to the war and resulting displacement situation. With the country's living conditions deteriorating and the number of Syrians living below the poverty line exceeding 90%, many children have been forced to drop out of school and work to help cover their family's basic living expenses; the number of displaced children in Syria has reached about 2.6 million.

Existing factors were further exacerbated by a continuous shortage of school seats and the closure of dozens of schools as a result of damage inflicted on them. For instance, UNICEF statistics indicate that Syrian schools have been subjected to approximately 4,000 attacks since 2011, with one of every three schools being completely destroyed, partially damaged, or converted into military barracks or shelters for the displaced from other similarly affected areas. Other uses of schools have been documented, such as conversion into detention and interrogation centers for students by security services and intelligence agents.

Quality of Education in Conflict Zones

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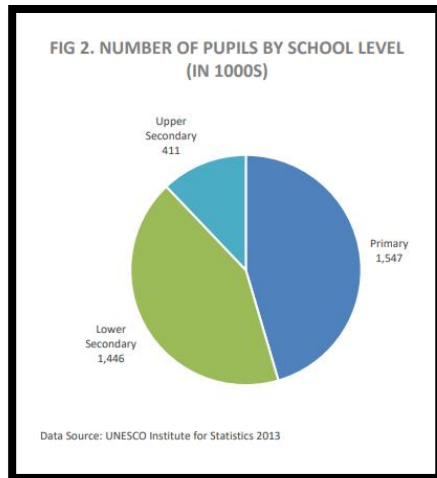
that Syrian schools have been subjected to approximately 4,000 attacks since 2011, with one of every three schools being completely destroyed, partially damaged, or converted into military barracks or shelters for the displaced from other similarly affected areas. Other uses of schools have been documented, such as conversion into detention and interrogation centers for students by security services and intelligence agents.

All of this has naturally resulted in educational institutions losing their sanctity and impartiality, as children are forced to choose between being targets of exploitation and recruitment by armed groups, or being denied the right to an education. In either case, the present situation does not lend itself to any rosy visions of a healthy, promising future.

ECE programs in conflict-affected areas face numerous quality challenges, including resource shortages and inadequately trained educators.

- **Teacher Training and Retention**: Teachers in conflict zones often lack trauma-informed training to address students' psychological needs. Many leave due to insecurity, further reducing the availability of qualified educators (Right to Education Initiative, 2018; UNICEF, 2023).

- **Resource Constraints**: ECE centers in war zones are frequently underfunded and lack essential teaching materials, clean water, and nutrition programs, undermining holistic development (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2019).

FIG 2. NUMBER OF PUPILS BY SCHOOL LEVEL (IN 1000S)

Upper Secondary 411

Primary 1,547

Lower Secondary 1,446

Data Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2013

Fragmented Curricula: Inconsistent and outdated curricula often fail to address the developmental needs of children affected by trauma (Moving Minds Alliance, 2023).

the official primary school entrance age is 6. The system is structured so that the primary school cycle lasts 6 years, lower secondary lasts 3 years, and upper secondary lasts 3 years.. UNESCO definitions are used for all tables and figures, unless otherwise stated. Syria has a total of 3,404,000 pupils enrolled in primary and secondary education. Of these pupils, about 1,547,000 (45%) are enrolled in primary education. **As we can see from the chart above the students who joins the primary education most of them drop learning from half of the way because of the lack of motivation they don't find what they are being taught is useful.**

Psychological and Developmental Impacts

Exposure to violence, instability, and displacement during early childhood leads to profound psychological and developmental challenges.

- **Trauma and Toxic Stress**: Children in conflict zones experience high levels of trauma and toxic stress, which impair cognitive and emotional development. For example, studies in Gaza and Afghanistan report elevated rates of PTSD, anxiety, and depression among young children (Right to Education Initiative, 2018; UNICEF, 2023).

- **Impact on Brain Development**: Toxic stress disrupts brain architecture, affecting memory, attention, and socio-emotional skills critical for learning (The Lancet, 2016).

- **Behavioral Challenges**: Emotional dysregulation, including aggression and withdrawal, is common among children exposed to conflict, further complicating classroom environments (UNESCO, 2019).

Long-Term Implications

The consequences of disrupted ECE extend beyond immediate educational outcomes:

- **Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Delays**: Without early intervention, children are at risk of long-term deficits in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills (Right to Education Initiative, 2018).

- **Perpetuation of Poverty and Instability**: Limited access to ECE perpetuates cycles of poverty and conflict, as children miss foundational learning opportunities critical for future education and employment (Moving Minds Alliance, 2023).

- A report by UNICEF has confirmed that nearly 400,000 Syrian refugee children in Turkey are out of school. Meanwhile, Turkey's Minister of Interior, Ali Yerlikaya, announced that Syrian refugees whose residence addresses have not been verified will lose their registration status if their addresses are not updated within a specified period.

- The UNICEF report, published on Saturday by opposition websites, highlights that Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees globally, with more than four million refugees and asylum seekers. Among them, over 3.6 million are from Syria.

- "Nearly 400,000 Syrian refugee children remain out of school. While access to education has expanded, progress has slowed in recent years," the report states.

- The report also underscores that school dropout is a significant issue among Syrian children, with many struggling to continue their education due to factors such as poverty, early marriage, and child labor.

- In addition, Syrian children face challenges in registering for schools due to a lack of legal documents, language barriers, and difficulties accessing schools because of geographical distance or financial problems. The report also notes disparities in school enrollment rates by age and gender, with children aged 10-13, particularly boys, experiencing higher dropout rates.

- Despite ongoing efforts to improve the quality of education for refugee children, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding the quality and relevance of education to the needs of Syrian children, which continue to hinder their educational progress.

Methodology

This study used a "triangulation design" that combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies to validate the researchers' conclusions. The descriptive research design was used to collect both numerical and narrative data. For the qualitative data, interviews were conducted, while surveys (questionnaires) were used to collect the quantitative data. Because it offers an integrated framework for the study and permits the use of a variety of measurements, including both textual evidence and numerical facts or statistics, triangulation design has been chosen by researchers to reinforce the results. This enabled the researchers to broaden their study of the subject because they were able to learn many points of view using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Participants/Study Sample:

In our study of this topic, we tried to shed light, take information, and analyse it from different parties affected with **warzones**. We interviewed a parent who have children affected by warzones asked them some questions related to the main topic. To enhance the information, we also made a questionnaire and published it on the internet.

Data Collection:

The methods the researchers used to collect information in this research were interviews with parent and a child of affected by warzones and a survey including various questions for affected parties. The interviews and the survey included 10 questions that were conducted with parent students, and the questions focused on the effects on education on the resources and how the expectations changed with developing situation and what are the major difficulties. We conducted a case study with Ahmed, a young Syrian child in Alkhabor, Syria. Ahmed, a child living in Alkhabor, Syria, faces immense challenges in accessing quality education due to the ongoing effects of war. Despite the current relative stability, his educational environment remains severely lacking. Ahmed spends 2-3 hours a week learning, often in a communal room with other children. This space is unsanitary, with a dirty floor and no desks, and the fear of planes being overhead frequently disrupts learning.

Ahmed has a strong interest in math, science, and Arabic stories, appreciating math's puzzles, science's insights, and stories' imaginative escapes. However, limited access to diverse materials

forces him to repeatedly use the same books, hindering his learning. His village lacks basic infrastructure like electricity and internet, preventing access to educational programs.

Ahmed needs consistent educational support, particularly in math. Sporadic tutor visits leave significant gaps in his understanding, and he struggles to balance education with farming and caring for siblings. Group learning appeals to him as it fosters collaboration, but environmental distractions and the scarcity of resources make sustained focus difficult.

Ahmed values education as a pathway to a better future for himself, his family, and his community, yet the uncertainty of safety and stability dampens his optimism. His case underscores the urgent need for interventions in conflict zones, including access to learning materials, regular tutoring, and safe study environments. These measures are critical to enabling children like Ahmed to pursue their education and dream of a brighter future. We got inspired by this case.

Results:

**Qualitative data analysis and discussion: (Interview)**

Based on the interview with the parent, we found that The conflict in Syria has profoundly disrupted education for this parent's children. Their school was destroyed, forcing multiple relocations and leaving their education marred by frequent absences due to security concerns and power outages. Basic resources like textbooks are scarce, often shared among children, while unreliable internet rules out online learning. The trauma of war, including the constant sound of explosions, has left the children anxious and struggling to concentrate. The family has adapted by forming a small community learning group where older children teach younger ones, but resources remain critically limited. Signs of PTSD are evident among the children, yet there is no

psychological support. The parent admires the dedication of unpaid teachers working under harsh conditions but acknowledges the urgent need for international assistance, including mobile education units, psychological services, and safe, resource-equipped learning spaces. And while interviewing the child we found A Syrian child describes the immense challenges of learning amidst conflict. With limited study time each week, they struggle to catch up using borrowed or repetitive textbooks. Their communal study space—a dirty, the sandy room in the village—is noisy and unsafe, often disturbed by planes overhead. They enjoy math, science, and Arabic stories but lack access to diverse learning materials, the internet, or electricity. They find group learning effective but yearn for consistent tutoring, especially in math, suggesting 3-5 weekly hours would suffice. Responsibilities like farming and caregiving further limit study time. Despite believing in education's power to improve their future, they are deeply affected by their surroundings and uncertain if safety and stability will ever return.

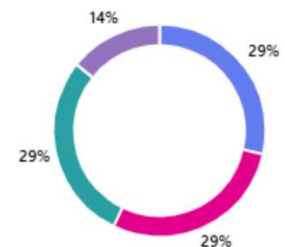**Quantitative data analysis and discussion: (Survey)**

1- How regularly have your children attended school over the past 12 months??

- يوميًا
- عدة مرات في الأسبوع
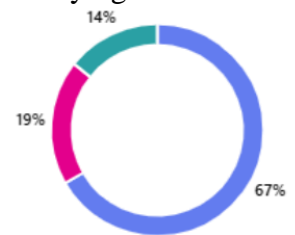- نادرًا
- لم يحضروا على الإطلاق

24%
43%
14%
19%
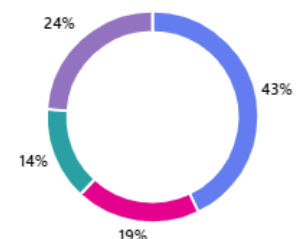
2- How much educational progress do you think your children have made compared to their peers in non-conflict areas?

- 0% - 25%
- 26% - 50%
- 51% - 75%
- 76% - 100%

14%
29%
29%
29%
29%

3- How have security conditions affected your child's ability to concentrate on studying?

- ● تأثير سلبي كبير
- ● تأثير سلبي متوسط
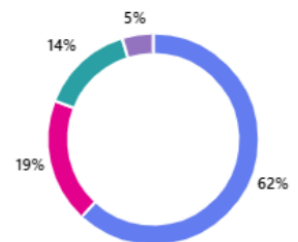- ● تأثير بسيط
- ● لا يوجد تأثير

14%

19%

67%

4- What is the main source your family relies on for educational materials?

- ● المدرسة المحلية
- ● التعليم الإلكتروني
- ● المراكز المجتمعية
- ● التعليم المنزلي بدون موارد رسمية
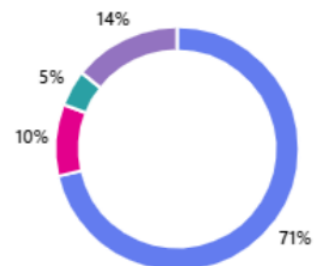
43%

57%

5- To what extent do you think the conflict has affected the quality of education your children receive?

- ● تأثر كبير
- ● تأثر متوسط
- ● تأثر بسيط
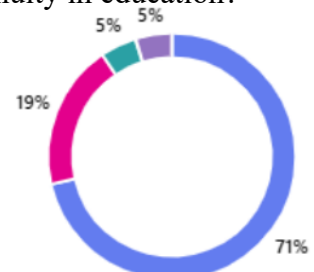- ● لم يتأثر

5%

14%

19%

62%

6- Is your family short on educational supplies such as books and study materials?

- ● نعم، بشكل كبير
- ● نعم، بشكل متوسط
- ● نعم، ولكن بشكل بسيط
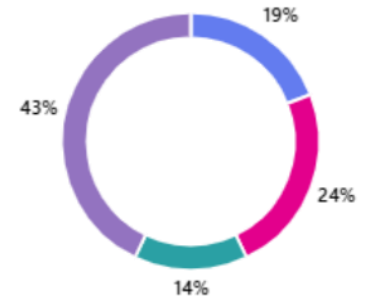- ● لا، المستلزمات متوفرة بما يكفي

14%

5%

10%

71%

7- How much does displacement or relocation impact your children's continuity in education?

- ● أثر كبير جدًا
- ● أثر متوسط
- ● أثر بسيط
- ● لم يؤثر

5% 5%

19%

71%

8- How much psychosocial support is available to children in school to enhance their ability to learn in conflict?

- ● دعم كبير جدًا
- ● دعم متوسط
- ● دعم بسيط
- ● لا يوجد دعم

19%
43%
24%
14%

9 - Do you think your children are losing any educational or social skills due to lack of interaction with their peers in a stable educational environment?

- ● نعم، بشكل كبير
- ● نعم، بشكل متوسط
- ● نعم، ولكن بشكل بسيط
- ● لا، لا يوجد فقدان ملحوظ

10%
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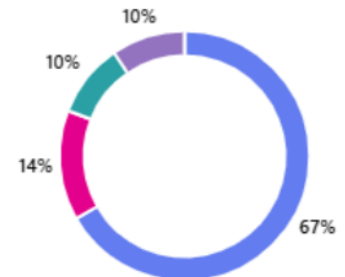
10 - How do you think education in your area could be improved through technological solutions

(such as distance learning or educational apps)?

- ● حل فعال جدًا
- ● حل فعال بشكل متوسط
- ● حل فعال ولكن بحاجة إلى تحسين
- ● غير فعال

5%
19%
52%
24%
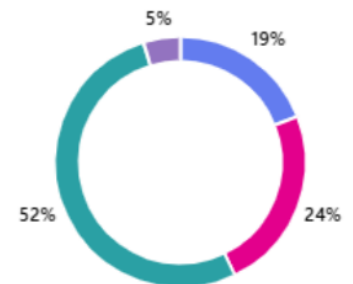
To better understand the educational struggles and needs of Syrian children during wartime, a

comprehensive survey was conducted with participants from various parts of Syria. The survey

aimed to gather insights from Syrian families and individuals on the realities of education amidst conflict. By analyzing their responses, we sought to identify the key obstacles children face, including resource shortages, psychological challenges, and infrastructural issues. The findings offer a deeper understanding of how families adapt to these hardships and highlight the urgent need for targeted support to address the educational crisis in Syria. This analysis sheds light on the resilience of Syrian communities in fostering learning under dire circumstances and underscores the importance of developing sustainable solutions to secure a brighter future for their children. **Note: The answer key is in Arabic because the survey was conducted with Arabic-speaking Syrian people.**

 Solutions:

To solve these problems we came up with two types of solutions. Immediate & remedial solutions and proactive & sustainable solutions, and from them we branched more narrow and specific solutions as shown in the mind map:
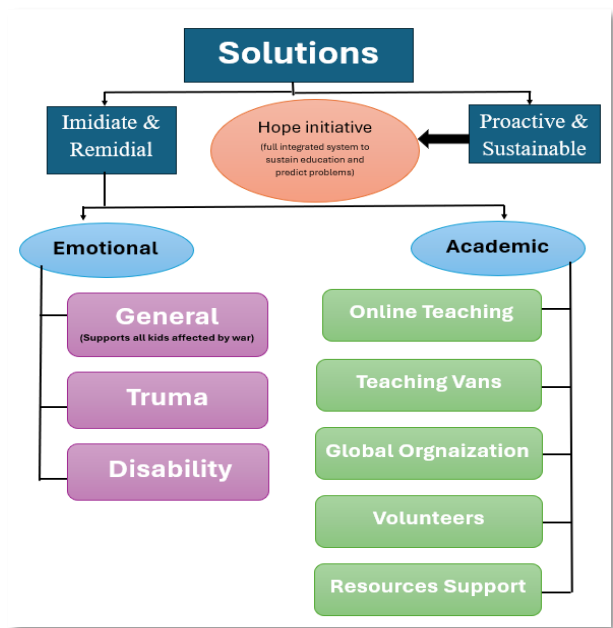
Immediate & remedial solutions:

Emotional : In the immediate remedial solutions, we proposed two distinct approaches to provide emotional support : one tailored for all children at a general level and another specifically designed for vulnerable groups who are often overlooked in such circumstances. Our aim is to ensure inclusivity by addressing the unique needs of these children, offering them the care and support they require through innovative and practical methods as in the table below

General Kids		Special Groups:
IDEA	IDEA	1- Trauma Victims:
Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS)	Psychoeducational Workshops:	•Trauma Counseling Units: Establish mobile trauma counseling vans with psychologists.
DESCRIPTION:	DESCRIPTION:	•Offer teletherapy through online platforms with translation services.
Establish temporary, safe spaces where children can engage in play and	Short workshops for children to understand and manage emotions.	

Academic:

To solve acadmic challenges that earlychildhood education face during war times, we suggested five innovative ideas with their implemintations, these ideas will mainly lessen the amount of illiterate people that will possibally be created by the wars and conflicts as shown in the table:

IDEA	IMPLEMETATION
1- Online Teaching DESCREPTION: Create a multilingual, low-bandwidth online learning platform by using gamified lessons tailored to children's contexts.	• Provide solar-powered tablets pre-loaded with educational resources. • Train local teachers to guide children on how to use these platforms. •Learning Machines: AI systems that assess individual learning levels and adapt lessons accordingly.
2- Teaching Vans: DESCREPTION: Mobile classrooms are equipped with teaching materials and technology.	• Equip vans with solar power, interactive whiteboards, and laptops. • Rotate through underserved areas weekly with a team of teachers.
3- Global Organizations DESCREPTION: Global Partnerships: Partner with UNESCO, UNICEF, and Save the Children for funding, training, and resources.	Intergrate these orgnaizations in all aspects of interventions and give them spcace to share their experience with each other to benefit the affected parties
4- Volunteer Networks DESCREPTION: Establish an online portal to recruit and coordinate Arab and international educators.	Train volunteers in trauma-informed teaching methods.
5- Resource Support: DESCREPTION: Create context-relevant lessons that are culturally and socially aligned.	Partner with tech companies for hardware (tablets, laptops) and software licenses.

Proactive & Sustainable:

Hope initiative: a fully integrated system to sustain education and predict problems. As we have observed, the Middle East region has been a victim of wars and selfish parties throughout the decades. Unfortunately, we can't know when these selfish parties will take action, where, or how. But we can learn from our previous experience that this region is always in danger. So we came up with an innovative idea to be prepared for these situations by creating an organization called Hope Initiative. This is a structured plan combines immediate action with sustainable long-term

solutions to address educational challenges in conflict zones we structuered it as shown in the table below:

VISION: A system to sustain education in war-affected areas and address future challenges through prevention, intervention, and innovation.		
STRUCTURE	DESCREPTION	PHASES & IMPLEMENTATION
Educational Infrastructure Development	Build modular, disaster-resistant schools & Establish learning hubs with digital connectivity in refugee camps.	Phase 1: Planning and Partnerships (Year 1) • Form a governing council with representatives from Arab countries. • Identify priority areas using conflict and displacement data. • Secure funding and technology partnerships.
Teacher Training and Retention	Train teachers in crisis pedagogy and mental health first aid & Offer incentives like stipends or housing to retain skilled educators.	
Community Engagement:	Mobilize local communities to act as co-educators & Create parent and youth ambassador programs to support education.	Phase 2: Pilot Programs (Year 2–3) • Launch pilot projects in select war-affected regions. • Evaluate programs like teaching vans, trauma counseling, and AI-based learning.
Technological Innovation:	AI-Driven Education: Implement AI tools for personalized learning pathways & Early Warning Systems: Use predictive analytics to identify areas at risk of educational disruption.	Phase 3: Scaling and Integration (Year 4–5) • Expand successful pilot projects to other regions. • Integrate the initiative into national education policies of Arab nations.
Research and Data Collection:	Create a central database to track education outcomes, trauma impacts, and attendance rates & Use the data for targeted interventions.	Phase 4: Sustainability and Monitoring (Year 6+) • Establish local management teams for long-term sustainability.
Funding and Partnerships	Establish a coalition of Arab nations to fund "The Hope Initiative & Encourage CSR partnerships with companies for financial and technological support.	• Continuously evaluate and refine the system based on outcomes.

Conclusion :

Education in conflict zones is both a casualty of war and a beacon of hope for affected communities. This report demonstrates the devastating impact of conflict on early childhood education, from psychological trauma to resource scarcity. The findings highlight the resilience of communities like Syria's, where families and educators strive to create learning opportunities despite immense challenges. Through the "Hope Initiative," this report presents a roadmap combining immediate interventions—such as psychological support and temporary learning facilities—with long-term solutions like robust educational frameworks. By prioritizing the needs of children and leveraging regional and international collaboration, we can transform education into a tool of empowerment and a foundation for peace.

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